

‘It was sort of like a globe of abuse’. A psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse

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Qualitative Social Work

'It was sort of like a globe of abuse'. A psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse.

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Keywords:	Child protection, Psychosocial, Critical realism, Emotional abuse, Professional practice
Abstract:	<p>This article draws on research findings from an ESRC funded PhD psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse. In the context of child protection social work, this harm occurs within the relationship between a parent and their child. Emotional abuse is a complex concept, comprising of many cumulative elements, which may include restricting a child's psychological autonomy. Although not so clearly observed as other forms of parental harm, it causes the most significant impairment. Making the less tangible aspects of working with this form of child abuse more visible was a key goal of the research, along with improving professional understandings of how to work with it more effectively. The focus of this article is the methodological framework for this small qualitative study. The framework is a critical realist view of social work practice, with a psychosocial research approach. Psychosocial methods incorporate researcher and research participants use of self to explore the often deeply subjective, and undocumented process, of identifying the presence or risk of emotional abuse. This article draws on one social worker's narrative of encountering emotional abuse to exemplify some of the professional and personal challenges the work presents. The research sought to elicit responses that enabled social workers to share their unconscious thought processes to get under the surface of everyday decision-making. Sharing their 'workings out'. With the aim of illuminating the complexity of work with emotional abuse, this research provides a methodological template for research that supports more effective interventions with emotional abuse.</p>

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Abstract

This article draws on research findings from an ESRC funded PhD psychosocial exploration of child protection social work with emotional abuse. Intrafamilial harm occurs predominantly within the relationship between a parent and their child in the context of this research. Emotional abuse is a complex concept, comprising of many cumulative elements, which may include restricting a child’s psychological autonomy. Emotional abuse is not so clearly observed as other forms of parental harm, but it causes the most significant impairment. The dual overarching goals of this research was to make the less tangible aspects of work with this form of child abuse more visible, and to improve professional understandings of how to work with it more effectively. The focus of this article is to exemplify how the critical realist methodological framework, and psychosocial research approach were developed to underpin the data collection and analysis processes. Psychosocial methods incorporate researcher and research participant’s use of self to explore the often deeply subjective, and undocumented process of identifying the presence of emotionally abusive behaviour. The research sought to elicit responses that enabled social workers to share their unconscious thought processes to get under the surface of everyday decision-making. Sharing their ‘workings out’. This article draws on one social worker’s narrative of encountering emotional abuse to illuminate some of the professional and personal challenges the work can present. This research provides a methodological template for further research into supporting social workers in effective interventions into intrafamilial emotional abuse.

Introduction

There is very little research that looks at the undocumented aspects of social work decision-making processes, and even less about how emotional abuse is defined, assessed and evidenced. Insights into the role that social workers’ cultural, personal and subjective selves play in their assessment and intervention of emotional abuse are required.

The current literature suggests that cumulatively, work with emotional abuse carries a broad array of additional challenges, the most prevalent of which concerns the unacknowledged emotional labour experienced by child protection professionals.

This paper takes an in-depth look at one social worker's daily work with emotional abuse, and how they managed themselves in this task. A narrative approach exemplifies why social worker 'subjectivity' should not be repressed or deemed unprofessional. The use of the term 'subjectivity' is derived here from the psychoanalytic tradition and refers to an individual's emotional and personal characteristics, such as their social and cultural background. Social workers are subjective beings with agency. They bring aspects of themselves to the job and may therefore 'react to things in ways that feel beyond words' (Rose 2012: 153). The stance of this research is that a social worker must acknowledge their own expectations about what, for example, denotes a warm and loving relationship; and possibly reconsider their assumptions (Pecnik and Bezensek-Lalic 2011). Aspects of the self should be used reflexively and assertively alongside more pragmatic 'checks and balances' in work with emotional abuse.

There is risk attached to taking this perspective. Acknowledging one's subjectivity brings focus to personal foibles. As an often publicly criticised profession, this stance opens up social workers to further scrutiny, potentially galvanising the existing 'cultural trope' of blaming social workers for failing to protect children (Shoesmith 2016). However, when faultfinding is put to one side, defenses can be lowered, and a greater degree of honesty may emerge in explanations for professional decision-making processes. Exploring the 'intersectional identities' (Wetherell 2008: 78) of social workers is integral to improving professional practice with emotional abuse; how, for example, their personal motivations for doing the work impact upon the assessment process. Greater clarity about the difficulties of practice with abuse may develop through increased self-awareness.

A psychosocial approach has been key to this research. It requires a researcher to use their own emotional and physical reactions to assist in understanding the interview material, thereby providing 'points of entry into data analysis' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 166). This often involves starting with a feeling to inform subsequent

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thinking about the complexities of work with emotional abuse. Having used my own experiences of the work as a starting point, I have been able to embrace my sense of similarity and difference to the participants, rather than making unrealistic claims to scientific objectivity. My subjective role as a social work researcher has aided the understanding that researching the assessment of abuse can, at times, be a messy process (Thomson and Gunter 2011). I have shared the participants' experiences, and my interpretations of them. A psychosocial research approach requires a level of self-awareness that facilitates the recognition of complex emotions and identities. This commitment to transparency may be seen as strength of the design.

Emotional Abuse: A contested notion

Previous research has revealed that social workers struggle with recognising, naming and intervening in cases of emotional abuse (Iwaniec et al. 2007). A possible reason for this is that the impact of emotional abuse on children is experienced and played out predominantly within the psychosocial rather than the physical domain. Work with emotional abuse importantly encompasses the social worker's use of their self in the job. This is particularly challenging to demonstrate in work with emotional abuse, as it is an additional aspect of work that is not always easy to make visible.

Understandings about what constitutes emotional abuse, or even whether it exists, vary according to historical, cultural and geographic context (Iwaniec 2007; Glaser 2012). Child abuse, and specifically the concept of emotional abuse, has a recent history (Munro 2008). Social workers have specific statutory duties requiring them to protect children from significant harm through abuse and neglect. It is the practical and emotional difficulties of carrying out social work in a real world, not a theoretical one, that is of interest to this research. From a realist perspective the existence of human suffering is not just a 'value-judgment' (Robson 2002).

This research is cognisant with English law, which indicates that children may be defined as experiencing one or more of four categories of abuse. These categories are designated under the Children Act 1989 (CA89) to be physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Allegations of physical abuse may be substantiated by injuries caused non-accidentally and/or with discrepant explanations; disclosures of sexual abuse may be supported by forensic evidence gained through medical examination; neglect may be demonstrated by

developmental delays, poor hygiene and an unkempt appearance (Glaser 2002; Iwaniec 2003; Sheehan 2006). In cases of emotional abuse not all of what a child is feeling and experiencing will be apparent to others. Identifying emotional abuse and assessing levels of harm is often harder to do than with other forms of abuse, as the signs are less transparent or tangible (Smith Slep et al. 2011). With the effects being less observable, they are more challenging to attribute directly to emotionally abusive behaviours by parents and caregivers (Glaser & Prior 1997).

Methodology: A stratified approach

The ontological premise of the research is located in the real world of the institution of social work which regards child abuse as actual and real. It has critical realist underpinnings derived from the work of Bhaskar (1979) who proposed that reality has depth, and that knowledge about reality is infinite. Bhaskar (1978) suggests a theoretical model to represent the 'stratified' world with its multi-levels of causation, which offers a way of conceptualising the reality social workers inhabit. It has three layers of interest: the actual, the real and the empirical. Bhaskar does not explore what these are in his work, although others such as Hood (2012) and Elder-Vass (2004) have sought to investigate what each layer of the model could represent in a broader societal context.

This research draws on these derived ideas of Hood and Elder-Vass to demonstrate how the three layers might be applied to the social work profession. The actual represents the institutional aspect of social work; the policies and laws, such as CA89, social workers use to guide their practice. The real represents the individual reflective practitioner who has their own social ideas about relationships and how they engage with the institutional aspects. The domain of the empirical involves the exploration of these practitioners' deeper thought processes; this is the psychological level at which the social worker experiences their practice. The layers are not static descriptions, and can be reinterpreted according to context. This interpretation of Bhaskar's stratified model can be linked to the more contemporary critical realist ideas of Archer (2007) who views the individual as a 'reflexive agent'. Archer regards the social worker as not merely a representative of the state but a complex and multifaceted being who mediates between their own thought processes and the external world (Archer 2007).

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Social workers are not simply rational beings but have conscious and unconscious capacities to express themselves in a variety of ways. Archer addresses the domain of social workers' empirical processes more directly. She proposes that social workers use internal 'analytical narratives' to navigate the difficult terrain in their stratified world between their deeper thoughts, aspects of their own social ideas about relationships, and the laws and policies that guide them. It is their internal voice that directs them how to reconcile 'problems of structure and agency'. In a psychosocial context, it is social workers' use of self in a reflexive way that allows them to make sense of what is happening around them and directs them how to act in a particular situation.

Operationalising Critical Realism through Psychosocial methods

The 'anchor' of critical realism ontologically and epistemologically situates the research study in the real world of social work practice. Psychosocial methods facilitate in-depth explorations into the domain of the empirical layer of social work with emotional abuse. The challenges child protection social workers experience in their everyday work may be understood through a psychosocial exploration of practitioners' deeper thought processes.

The term 'psychosocial' embraces a range of disciplines (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). There are a number of divisions within the psychosocial tradition, but it is most useful to view psychosocial studies as 'an emergent perspective' (Clarke and Hoggett 2009:2) that responds to our growing appreciation of the complexity of the individual. It has been described as more of 'an attitude, a position towards the subject of study rather than methodology' (Clarke 2008:113). It offers a collection of approaches from the three disciplines of sociology, social work and psychology. The work of Hollway and Jefferson (2013) has been particularly influential on this research project. Hollway and Jefferson differentiate their psychosocial approach to others, particularly those used in medical and health studies, in that theirs pays due attention to the challenge of 'individual-social dualism' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: xiii) rather than by-passing the problems this can create. They clarify their use of the term psychosocial as 'Conceptualising human subjects as, simultaneously, the products of their own unique psychic worlds *and* a shared social world' (Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 4 cited in Hollway and Jefferson 2012: xiii).

Psychosocial approaches draw on psychoanalytic theory and practice, which originate from the work of Freud (Trevithick 2012). Psychoanalytic theory places 'relationship at the heart of what it is to be human' (Gomez 1997:1). From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, we are all anxious, and we defend against our anxieties in various ways. For example, it is a common response for families under pressure of child protection investigations to engage in defensive mechanisms such as 'splitting'. Splitting is a process that originates in childhood, and is a defensive mechanism carried into later life. It 'oscillates between external and internal manifestations' (Tennison 2002: 1). 'Splitting' when it is 'done' to others occurs when, for example, a parent praises or condemns different professionals who are working with them. Professionals may internalise these feelings of being valued or devalued and carry a polarised sense of being good or bad at their job. They may act out on this, responding by liking or disliking the service-user. This embodiment of binary thought processes may be played out in relationships between the worker and other team members, producing yet more splits if they remain unacknowledged and reconciled.

Psychosocial methods are often used to understand the unique qualities of individuals or the 'personal identifications' (Clarke and Hoggett 2009: 7) that underlie the commitment of people who work in welfare to their jobs. In its eclectic composition of influences, a psychosocial approach lends itself to researching the equally diverse and complex nature of social work practice with emotional abuse. It thereby enhances the flexibility of the existing critical realist framework, providing the research approach with a 'methodological bricolage' (Kincheloe 2001) that matches the complexity of the subject matter.

Researcher Subjectivity

There is an emphasis in this work on the researcher and participant as 'co-producers of meaning' (Clarke 2009: 8), with a focus on aspects such as the unconscious dynamic that arises. This approach has influenced the shape the research has taken. In using such a methodology, a researcher may, during and after the interview, reflect on their own affective responses, such as unexpected discomfort, or wonder about parts of the participant's narrative that seem incoherent or incomplete. In the case of interviewing social workers about complex cases, considering such subjective reflections as potential counter-transference may be particularly useful in

recognising issues such as the unspoken fears a social worker may be experiencing whilst working with children who are suffering emotional abuse. In this work I explore and learn from all of the participants, with the aim of focusing on their individual experiences and feelings about work with emotional abuse.

Research sample

The qualitative data in this research were gathered from a sample of child protection social workers from two local authorities in the South East of England. Two focus groups were conducted, designed to generate broad themes to be further explored in individual interviews. Eight social workers were interviewed individually twice, with their follow-up interview held approximately two months after the first to give the interviewee an opportunity to reflect on the subject matter. The semi-structured interview schedule included exploration of how factors such as previous practice experiences, educational training and cultural background contributed to participants' decision-making processes during assessment and intervention with cases of emotional abuse. A 'second level' of data analysis was incorporated into the interpretive process. Two groups of social work students and practitioners formed panels to offer their interpretations of excerpts from interview transcripts. This article offers a detailed analysis of a research participant's interview, and the way in which an excerpt of it was discussed by a panel. The goal of this, rather than looking at two or three interviews, or across the data set was demonstrate an in-depth look at individual subjectivity.

Research Method

The psychosocial approach for data collection processes places an emphasis on open questions, thereby promoting narrative responses from participants. In constructing a framework for analysing some of the interviews the suggested stages of Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) 'listening guide' were followed during analysis of the interview recordings and transcripts. This is a listening method with a flexible structure consisting of four main readings of a text, which may be adapted according to 'the nature of the topic under investigation' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 405). During a first 'listening to', themes were identified, evocative descriptions of cases were pulled out, plot was 'listened' for, and initial responses were recorded. I also listened out for my own reactions to what I was hearing and how that impacted on the prompts I made during the interviews. I heard myself checking out the 'meaning-

frame' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013) of the social workers I interviewed to clarify if we had similar understandings about their responses to the situation we were discussing. This was so that as far as possible, I did not misinterpret their intended meaning. During a second level of analysis, I focused on the 'active I' in people's stories: trying to explore their subjective influence on their decision-making. A third listening, 'reading for relationships' (Mauthner and Doucet 2008), revealed the nature of connection and rapport the social workers, I thought, had with the service-users, and also the nature of the relationship between myself and the participant.

A fourth stage of listening placed people in their cultural context to understand how individual social workers negotiate aspects of their own identities within their broader work environment. Listening to the interviews in this way, multiple times, allows for the participant to be viewed from different perspectives, offering a deeper and more complete view of them. The structure this offered an analytic framework with which to analysis various element of an interview, without isolating them from the wider narrative. It also allowed me the opportunity to reflect upon my own intersecting identities as a researcher and social worker, in addition to the subjective elements of my own analytic interpretations.

My own experience as a child protection social worker led to me to possibly identify too readily with the struggles of the participants, possibly drawing conclusions about data gathered from interviews that overlooked other potential explanations. This may be referred to as 'wild analysis' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). Sharing data with groups of panels of people unrelated to the research process is a psychosocial approach that enables researchers to draw back from the data and reflect on their subjective contribution to the analysis process. Therefore, data analysis panels contributed an additional source of data to the research.

Exploring subjectivity in practice: 'Li'

It is not always easy for social workers to put into words what is troubling about a family relationship and why emotional abuse is a concern, particularly under the pressures of limited time and resources. During an interview Li, an experienced child protection social worker, explored how she uses her empirical experiences to decide that a case was emotionally abusive. She progressed beyond her personal

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interpretations about what provoked her concerns to build evidence, which a court was able to accept as significantly harmful.

I asked Li to talk about a case where emotional abuse was clearly present. As many participants who volunteered to participate in the research, she answered by relating a story which was seemed to be conversely, quite opaque at the outset in its collection of emotionally abusive factors. It was a narrative about a mother and her relationship with her 12 year old daughter:

...it was very much like a Siamese relationship and I've never seen something like this before. So, you know, sort of sleeping in the same bunk bed, her completely isolated from everything that was outside. You know, she didn't attend school, she didn't attend nursery, she didn't attend any form of activities of a child her age. She was quite... She was very cute but in a way...in a very strange way because she liked insects and reptiles, and for a girl to enjoy watching reptiles and like insects, it's kind of unusual. Quirky I could say, but not necessarily it was on the verge of quirkiness, and you know, weirdness and stuff like that. So it was quite tricky. Third generation where she lived. So she was the third generation living with mum and grandmother in the same house, all seem to be, you know, sort of like a...I can't even describe...like a globe of abuse so it was everything happening inside the house.

A first 'listening'

During my initial 'listening to' the first interview transcript with Li, I focused on her evocative narrative. I wondered about the culture of social workers; how stories about a family situation may be constructed to demonstrate their concerns, for the benefit of the listener. Visual representations of the family in Li's narrative are of particular interest. Metaphors can fill in the gaps in situations where concerns seem intangible, and evoke strong emotional responses. Li started her narrative about the family with the figurative use of term 'siamese twins', which would not have the same impact had the phrase 'conjoined twins' been used. To me it suggested an unnatural spectacle that might be found in a Victorian freak show. The weaving together of such dramatic 'presentational and discursive symbols' (Hollway and Froggett 2012: 14) were

perhaps intended to evoke fear and disgust, and to emphasise the situation was clearly wrong and unnatural.

There are aspects of the parent's care in the first part of Li's narrative that are more consensually and objectively worrying, such as a child who is isolated from contact with other children or the outside world. Li moved on to talk about the child in a more abstract way, drawing on some gendered assumptions about what girls should be like, when she described the child's liking of 'insects and reptiles'. I thought back to the traditional 1800s nursery rhyme that conveys popular stereotypes about children, where girls are made of 'sugar and spice and everything nice' whilst little boys are made of 'frogs and snails and puppy dog tails'. This folklore suggests that boys embody insects and reptiles, whilst girls embody other 'nice' and sweet things, reinforcing the idea that children who do not subscribe to their gendered preferences are unnatural. I felt conflicted about this story as Li spoke; on the one hand I do not think a girl who likes insects and reptiles is strange, but on the other hand I thought there could easily be another situation where I might fleetingly make a judgment based on some assumptions that are embedded in my own cultural experiences and childhood, and perhaps, if I had held the same opinion as Li on a girl's preferences, this it would be concerning to me too. 'In making everyday judgments, people take mental shortcuts' (Munro 1999: 797). Li's story was imbued with her own notions of 'normality'.

Descriptions of stereotypical gendered behaviours assisted Li in beginning to unpick what she saw as a skewed and sinister scene. Non-judgmental spaces to 'work through' thoughts can help avoid the suppression of 'wrong' or 'inappropriate' beliefs which can lead to more serious misjudgments or oversights. The problem with this, however, is that although the child's liking of insects and reptiles was not itself worrying, when woven into the story it becomes part of a bigger picture. I wondered where in the 'real' world of social work practice would Li define the boundaries between judging the parent-child relationship as emotionally abusive rather than just an extremely close one that was unfamiliar and strange to her? In making a connection between Li's 'inner' world of emotional reactions to a child and the 'outer' realities (Winnicott 1962) of her social worker role, the difficult boundary between subjective judgments about relationships and the realities of labeling a case as objectively concerning must be continually acknowledged.

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The last section of the quote is perhaps the most concerning in terms of mapping child protection concerns through chronological methods; the ‘globe of abuse’ seemed to refer to the intra-familial history of abuse. The description of the nature of the relationship between the mother and daughter was rich and memorable. An abusive family system maintained by three generations of the family living under the same roof. Li subsequently described the daughter as the ‘third generation of subtle emotional abuse’. The description of the ‘globe of abuse’ had the instant and powerful consequence of inducing a strong emotional effect in me. I was alarmed by the suffocating dynamics within the family home. Even though the precise meaning of the situation remained vague and unclear (Rose 2012), I felt sufficiently disturbed to trust that Li’s concerns for the child were not without basis, particularly alongside the rest of the more factual worries that she subsequently raised.

Trusted relationships between colleagues

Li’s narrative is typical of how a story might be related to friends, colleagues, or in informal situations. This was an informal telling of an assessment for emotional abuse. For many social workers, the telling of such a story, may be a mechanism to be used in a safe space with trusted ‘similar and familiars’ (Archer 2007: 270); between colleagues with comparable experiences, who may be able to listen, support and guide each other to make sense of something they find troubling. Li used established symbols from a ‘societal collective unconscious’ (Hollway and Froggett 2012) to build a fuller picture of the dark, oppressive nature of the home and the relationships she encountered within it. The way someone tells a story may ‘reveal what is important to the interviewee’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 1), and Li’s narrative is an example of how social workers’ personal and subjective responses to families can ‘muddy the waters’, and detract from building an evidential case about the presence of emotional abuse. Judgments are formed through interpersonal interactions that are ‘encoded in a complex web of political, cultural, social, and family relationships.’ Therefore ‘what we see is mediated by what we expect to see’ (Nicholls 2009: 171). Li had gendered expectations of girls, and her subjective feelings had to be sorted from the more ‘concrete’ evidence in order to arrive at a case that could be taken to a court of law. Later in the interview Li said much more about the other evidence she gathered in respect of the family to construct a basis upon which she was able to remove the child from her mother’s care, which stemmed

from her descriptions. These included poor school attendance, fabricated illness and social isolation.

Cultural difference

During our second interview I reflected with Li upon our first interview. I felt grateful for her transparency, and I did not want Li to lose trust in me by interrogating her about her descriptions of the family, but I wanted to know more about the mother and daughter 'Siamese Twins'. What she had shared had disturbed her, even though it would not be included in a court report. I asked her to explain what makes a particular situation strange, or strikes us as unsettling.

Li said that the family came from another European country where close-knit family life is normal and against this background the mother's behaviour was not so unusual. She felt that cultural circumstances played an important role. Behaviours like the family's level of physical closeness that might seem excessive to us, were not so unusual in their country of origin. In part, it seemed that Li took a step back and qualified her initial observations by deconstructing what she'd already said. Perhaps by referring to the more 'real' world of accountability and fact, she separated her subjective thoughts from the evidence available. She offered more concrete evidential information about chronologies of harmful behaviour in the family unit.

I asked Li more about her own origins, and experiences of growing up in one country, practising social work there, and then moving to work in the UK. Li grew up and first practised social work in another country, where there was an expectation that people cared for another's children without real financial gain. She had found it to be a huge contrast when she relocated to England and encountered a care system where children were not accepted by foster carers in the same way as their own children. There were many conditions and financial transactions attached to their accommodation.

Li said her experiences of growing up in a different culture gave her the advantage of insight into the cultural misunderstanding that arise between immigrant families to England and social services. She was able to change what she called her 'hat' when she needed to express clearly to parents what to do when she identified their behaviours as harmful. She used her own experiences to explain to families why

social workers become involved in their lives and where the thresholds of acceptable behaviour lie:

Okay, fine, you are from a different culture; do your own culture and support your child with your own culture, but you can't send a child to school with head lice; you can't just not engage, you know, or allow your child to access some form of education...I do my own stuff for example for Christmas I cook mixed Christmas. I cook turkey and I cook something else, or I bake, you know, mince pies and I bake my own traditional food, but I still send my children...

Habitus and the 'active I'

Following the second interview, the listening guide was used flexibly to focus on the 'active I' of Li's story. This puts the narrator at the centre of the story to 'speak about who they believe they are' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 406). Through the lens of this interpretation Li described her similarity to the family of being a migrant, but unlike them she had adjusted to her new environment. The mother in the 'Siamese Twin' case was using her sense of cultural difference as an excuse for neglectful and harmful parenting which, as a migrant herself, Li felt empowered to challenge.

Returning to Doucet and Mauthner's first level of analysis, I made space for exploring my own emotional responses to Li's narrative. Something remained unsaid about the way in which Li views the world, what she views as strange and how this influenced her thinking about the case. Although I was concerned she felt unable to immediately and simply answer the question, it can also be difficult to question one's values and ideals about what a healthy home-life constitutes. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1984) is useful in exploring why Li may have been unable to answer why the household struck her as strange. Habitus is a complex result of embodying social structures, such as ethnicity, welfare systems and educational experiences that we carry with us. Although the internalised notion of habitus should not be static, and constantly evolving with no 'deliberate pursuit of coherence' or 'conscious concentration' (Bourdieu 1984: 170) it is nonetheless the embodied history of our past experiences. To shift one's values about what constitutes 'normal' behaviour is not necessarily an easy and instantaneous task. If habitus is the embodiment of

structure, emotional responses may be seen as a structural output of a person's individual habitus.

Child protection social work is a complex and emotive subject. Social work practice is under high levels of 'critical media and political scrutiny' (Stanley 2013: 68). Social workers are under pressure to make the 'right' decisions. The expectation on social workers to cast aside their emotional responses and cultural reference points and instead seek out hard 'objective' evidence of abuse can be overwhelming. There is a particular pressure on social workers to find hard evidence, which corroborates the presence of risk. The process of seeking out such information is also arguably a means of endorsing one's own cultural assumptions and expectations and of avoiding a direct challenge to one's own habitus. This does not mean that the child was not at risk, but Li may have met my questions about the scary story with a fear of accountability, and an understandable reticence at dismissing her deeply held views that were, to her, intuitive sources of knowledge.

She focused instead on replacing her account of the relationship with factual information that could be used to evidence abuse in a more functional, but less nuanced way. I applied Doucet and Mauthner's fourth stage of analysis: placing people in cultural context to help me understand how individual social workers negotiate aspects of their own identities within the wider expectations of English child protection social work culture. For example, how they reconcile the law and policy definition of emotional abuse with what they believe in a more instinctive way to be a caring relationship; what love ought to look like. I noticed that Li referred to everyday 'normal' activities such as a baking at Christmas to model how it is possible to integrate one's own cultural difference into a broader English societal context. There is significant pressure on social workers to conform to the beliefs produced by a specific welfare system they work within. Li's activities as a social worker; how she uses her powers in her everyday work, depend on how successfully she is able to reconcile aspects of her subjectivity to meet the very specific cultural construction, and habitus, of English child protection social work.

Panel analysis

A central aspect of the psychosocial research design is consideration of my and the research participant's intersubjectivity as a means of gaining insights how

assessment of emotional abuse occurs. During data analysis the issue of 'wild analysis' is a clear concern. This involves the researcher drawing conclusions about interactions without any real basis for them. Instances of psychological elements, such as transference, may be perceived in every utterance, but these speculations about the participants are not tested for reality (Holloway and Jefferson 2013; Hoggett et al. 2010). I often reflected on how readily I was able to relate to some social workers more than others during the research process. Interested in enriching the research with other perspectives I subsequently introduced a 'second level' of data collection during the analysis phase in the form of panel analysis. This is a technique, which originates from Wengraf's (2011) 'Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

A research analysis groups was held, made up of four MA social work students. The analysis panel of students were given Li's description of the family home's globe of abuse, as detailed earlier in this article. The function of the panel was to 'kickstart' the interpretive process (Wengraf 2011), providing some checks and balances against the 'inherent epistemic risk' of wild analysis (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). The introduction of external members to the research process brought diverse viewpoints, allowing me to step back and examine my own relationship to the research.

The group members were asked to consider what was going on in the excerpts, what their reactions to the data were, and if it deepened their understandings of work with emotional abuse. The group were immediate concerns from the group that Li's descriptions were not of abuse and could clearly be explained by cultural difference. The group suggested the level of personal opinion and emotion displayed by Li was not a legitimate means of assessment, and that it should be curtailed:

Becca: There's not enough fact – perhaps use of emotional language is the only way to get it across, but obviously you have to have fact to back it up.

The group was self-moderating and they were keen to pose each possible side of the argument, acknowledging when they were perhaps 'playing devil's advocate', before offering potentially provocative statements. The group had very little information to go

on, but from the information they had they felt that Li was being too descriptive, too caught up in their 'value judgments' and one group member commented:

Wesley: It strikes me that you almost know more about Li than you know about the child.

The group seemed to echo the reflective, self-correcting stance of Li, exhibiting restraint and modification when they felt that they'd got carried away with their critique of Li's practice. One said 'perhaps we're being unfair' when they reflected on their own comments, acknowledging that their responses were based on very little information. The panel analysis group revealed to me the alarm that can be felt in reaction to the exposed emotions of a social worker. This led me to consider what happens to the individual and the profession when thoughts and feelings are considered wrong, and when they are suppressed or filtered. If there is 'a degree of deception between what the individual really feels and what they are supposed to feel' (Theodosius 2006: 896), where do unsaid and unsayable emotions (Hollway and Froggett 2012) like anger, fear, shame and guilt reside?

Filling in the gaps

I thought back to the social workers in previous child protection enquiries. This experience of facilitating a panel allowed me space to think about the wider social work context, and recalled social workers in previous child protection enquiries. Victoria Climbié was an 8 year old girl who was tortured and murdered by her guardians in 2000. Lisa Arthurworrey was Victoria Climbié's social worker. A newly qualified social worker, she was charged with missing multiple opportunities to protect Victoria. Although she was 'badly let down' (Laming 2003: 109) by her managers, at the time she was dismissed for her failings. It is exposing for social workers to be held up for public scrutiny for decision they have to make, particularly when they do not necessarily have all of the information they need to make the best decision for the child concerned. This is anxiety provoking for those involved. In cases where more worrying information subsequently comes to light, social workers are vulnerable to public criticism.

The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié suggested that oversights were made regarding her abuse because assumptions were made about her cultural background. Victoria stood to attention for her carers, which social worker Arthurworrey did not see as concerning because obedience is an 'important feature of the Afro-Caribbean family script' (Laming 2003: 345). Victoria's subservient behaviour alone would not be a scenario that would meet the thresholds for a child protection intervention, but it was an aspect of a broader and more concerning picture, which offered an insight into the relationship Victoria had with her carers. Arthurworrey explained this away through her interpretation of cultural norms.

This serves as a reminder that work with children and families from different cultures can happen 'through a veil' of ambiguity (Riessman and Quinney 2005: 400). Even when people speak the 'same' language, where there is uncertainty with regards to a family situation, it is sometimes easier to make convenient assumptions that reject disturbing ambiguities and allow the social worker to move onto the safer territory of concrete facts. A year on from carrying out this interview I wondered about how this evocative narrative gave rise to an excursion that 'infiltrated' my unconscious (Rose 2012). How it quickly became difficult to see the facts from the social worker's subjective observations, and in what ways these everyday interactions between professionals influence outcomes for service users. I wondered too about my power as a researcher, who was in the position to select this story from many others to re-tell, and in turn, influence opinions about emotional abuse and how it is identified.

I was grateful to Li for being candid about her feelings as, although most social workers feel strong emotional responses at some point, these are often hidden, as there is often a significant anxiety of being exposed as unprofessional. To present oneself as un-objective and emotional brings the risk 'of being caught out in the eyes of another person, seen more clearly by someone else than we can see ourselves' (Cooper 2012: 3). Through the process of moving from being a social work practitioner to experiencing social work practice as researcher I was left with the feeling of holding onto the profession's 'dirty secrets' (Morriss 2016). I felt that in order for these occupational experiences to be fully appreciated and understood, my new insights could not be 'unknown' but only retold amidst my own discomfort. However, in my analysis and telling of these secrets, I felt I had betrayed Li's trust and made her an easy target for criticism.

Shame in sharing?

The purpose of this research has been to articulate the more subjective processes involved in child protection social work with emotional abuse, and to demonstrate how social workers' emotions, experiences and perceptions intersect with the more conventional and directive systems of statutory child protection work. How the social worker who took part in this research negotiated their role has been explored in depth. What it is like for social workers to draw upon their subjectivity during complex assessments and decision-making has been unpacked, with the role of emotions work positioned prominently in social work practices.

I found the process of panel analysis both un-nerving but also reassuring. To share troubling data during the process of analysis, in much the same way as a social worker may be supported by their team when they are working with a complex case and may be experiencing a variety of psychodynamic processes. When the purpose is to look under the surface of what is going on, it has been suggested that 'it requires two minds to think a person's most disturbing thoughts' (Ogden 2009 cited in Hollway & Froggett, 2012: 281). I wondered if someone less submerged in the data would make different observations to mine.

In considering the responses of the social worker and the social work students, it is possible to explore the nature of their 'intersectional identities' (Wetherell 2008: 78) within the context of the assessment of this family. Li is a social worker, an agent of the state, under scrutiny to do the 'right' thing, and in this situation she simultaneously felt responsible for the children. She experienced protective and authoritative feelings, blurring the boundaries and recreating them through her empathy and reflective practice.

Subjective responses to challenging situations may impact on child protection work with emotional abuse. Bringing these responses to the surface for scrutiny can lead to defenses becoming raised by interviewees, researchers and panel members alike. Emotions such as anger, fear, shame and guilt have been identified as significant in everyday decision-making processes. Systemic pressures around accountability can lead to moral outrage and 'institutional shaming' (Gibson 2016) of social workers. Hiding subjective responses, particularly those that invite disapproval, may be a

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common and natural response. Creating space in the system where ‘honesty about our feelings and courage to speak up about this’ (Gibson 2016: 127) must be prioritised. This research suggests that emotional responses to the work should be reflected upon and critically considered in safe spaces so work may be carried out more effectively.

Conclusion

This research adopts a reflective approach that looks 'under the surface' for depth explanations about sociological data. It does this whilst remaining clearly positioned in context of statutory child protection social worker where clear indicators of harmful behaviour are required in order for legal interventions to occur. With the assistance of psychosocial methodology, the empirical domain of a social worker’s agency is explored. This research illuminates some of the ways in which their subjectivity plays a significant, often informal, role in work with emotional abuse. Participants’ responses are examined to consider what may be subjective or unconscious in their narratives, and what might be hidden or denied. Through exemplifying specific practice experiences, an in-depth account of everyday encounters of work with emotional abuse has emerged.

The research suggests that there are significant risks involved in sharing what may seem on the surface to be unprofessional practice. However, this is necessary and should be carried out in safe contained spaces so that challenging work with emotional abuse may be carried out to greater effect. The research importantly also considers the value of researcher use of self during the research process. This transparency in the research approach, allows for a deeper exploration of the nuances of practice with emotional abuse. This methodological stance ensures that individual social workers emerge in the research as three-dimensional human beings with vulnerabilities and strengths.

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